Intuition / Intellect – Sex / Sensibility

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Working with Intuition

'Permit yourself what you know'

Barney Simon

In contrast to the vast array of books which deal with the craft of acting and stage-management, there seem to be far fewer books which attempt to describe what directors do. The most common contemporary approach seems to be to present a collection of interviews, such as *In Contact with the gods? Directors talk theatre* (edited by Maria M. Delgado and Paul Heritage, 1996) and *On directing* (edited by Gabriella Giannachi and Mary Luckhurst, 1999). A possible reason for the dearth of material on directing techniques could be the fact that different directors' styles and approaches vary drastically. Exceptional directors seem to be characterised more by their personal idiosyncrasies than by their adherence to a specific methodology.

It may seem paradoxical to favour intuition over intellect in the current forum of an academic publication, but the strange territory which drama traverses between speech and writing, between performance and text, has never been an easy domain to quantify in academic terms. The word 'drama' arises from the Greek word 'to do' (Fortier, 1997:5), and staging a work requires a continuous process of pragmatic choices made in terms of very specific constraints. It hardly seems possible to formulate a general theory which can be used to describe a particular style of directing. For this reason, this essay will rather attempt to illustrate Clare Stopford's motivations by means of practical references to her actual productions, which will serve as historical examples of the types of choices she has made when confronted by specific conditions. We have thus tried at all times to maintain our focus on the particular rather than the general, and have eschewed any notions of the universal entirely.

As already mentioned, the word 'intuition' seems at first glance to constitute a rather woolly and all-encompassing construction to employ in an academic environment, and yet it is extremely difficult to find a substitute for this word. How else could one describe a process of making choices and engaging with the world on a highly personal level? As Stopford points out, perhaps the real knowledge of becoming a director is not something which can be relayed by means of text. Her own preparation for a piece involves the entirety of not only her world-view *(Weltanschauung)*, but of her world itself[1].

> How you work as a director is secret. It reflects who you are – your worldview and your inner landscape. A director's main tool is her intuition, and this is a very private process. Augusta Boal (1992), Keith Johnstone (1981) and Peter Brook (1972) may have shared their approaches by writing about them, and other practitioners and myself eagerly consume these books. Many of the concepts and ideas of the great directors find their way into our everyday working vocabulary, but you can't learn to be a good director from a book. Your imaginative world; your understanding of human behaviour; your ability to communicate; your willingness to collaborate; your ability to employ compassionate management – these are things you can only learn by living life, and then processing what you've learnt onto the stage.
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> Being an intuitive director means your craft improves as a result of your life experiences. You have to be avaricious about life, and I think most directors are. They want to know everything. They read everything. They listen to the radio all the time. You have to feed yourself constantly outside of theatre, in order to make theatre richer.
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> Perhaps this is a dictum for any practising artist. Barney Simon summed it up with one of his typically succinct injunctions which he offered regularly to actors, writers and directors. He said, 'Permit yourself what you know'. And what you know depends on who you are.
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> For myself, when Barney Simon called me 'intuitive', I think he meant that I inhabit a world of texture, intense feeling and sensuality; and he particularly related to that part of me. When I direct a play I believe in really committing myself; putting myself on the line each time and making each decision personal. But I think that Barney also respected my intellect. He would often ask for my analysis of a situation.
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> It might be tempting to read Barney Simon's distaste for bogus intellectualism and pretentious conceptualising as anti-intellectual. It's true that he favoured what he called a 'sensual life' on stage, and yet, he also encouraged the writer and director Neil McCarthy, whom he considered to be a cerebral practitioner: a man of ideas, concepts, images and satire. So I think Barney's method of developing talent was not to mould you into the image of himself, but rather to get you to 'shine the light on yourself'. As far as he was concerned, who you were, and the way in which you connected to the world were unique, and as long as you had the courage and energy to 'be up for the adventure' he would be endlessly generous with his input.
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> I don't think that I'm anti-academic. I believe I should know everything that has been written about a text. I naturally want to know what academics think, although this shouldn't distract from what I think of a text myself. The text is in my hands and I must make it breathe with life on stage. Ultimately, I think there's a different

> emphasis – an academic can propose arguments and leave thoughts in the air, but a director has to make practical choices. She must trust herself and what she wants to say otherwise the proposal on stage could end up being anaemic – 'deadly theatre', as Peter Brook put it in *The Empty Space* (1972).
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> When I talk about 'intuition', I don't mean something as whimsical as, say, 'inspiration' or, being a natural 'genius' or anything like that. It takes an enormous effort to direct, and one does require experience and education. Intuition has to start morphing through experience into craft, skill and some sort of tried and tested approach, however difficult it is to articulate exactly what this might be.
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> Of course, there are many different approaches. I can think, for example, of respected directors who spend up to two weeks sitting around a table analysing the text before putting it on the floor. But I'm not convinced that this yields a dynamic 'life' to the performance. It seems to me to be contrary to the actor's innate energy, which is to explore the text through action. My own preference is to mix and match action with analysis; to juxtapose the cerebral and the sensual all the time. Then it becomes clear very quickly if an actor doesn't understand the lines or the character. If that happens, I'll stop immediately and have the necessary conversation. And then it's imperative to immediately translate the ideas that arise out of that dialogue into action.
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> On the other hand, I've seen world famous directors who use the rehearsal floor as their personal platform for intellectual showmanship, and they might hold forth brilliantly on a subject for up to half an hour. But I'm not always sure how the performer is supposed to use these displays. I would say that only when actors start becoming drained of their own resources – *then* it becomes appropriate and energising for the director to come in from a more cerebral angle and to remind them of the themes and history of the play. It's then that they should talk about the approach of the writer, the aims of the production, and anything else which might excite and stimulate them, but let them first try to discover these for themselves in *action*.
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> On reflection, I do think that Barney respected my intellect. He would often ask for my analysis of a situation. So, I do think that the intellect has a very important role to play in the life of a director. Obviously abstract and conceptual thinking is axiomatic to the understanding of a text; but, for me, it's simply a matter of which process yields more fruit during rehearsals and, ultimately, on stage; and in my own experience, intuition yields more than intellect.

It does seem as though Stopford's idea of her own 'intuition' is intimately tied to a conception of her own identity in terms of her senses, feelings, and instincts[2]. One might wonder whether or not she is here subscribing to an innate 'feminine' view of her own directing. How does Stopford feel about working 'as a woman', and is this a significant part of her approach? If so, does she see the category of 'female' as intuitive, and 'male' as analytical, and would she consider this binary opposition to refer to essential qualities?

Stopford's relation to masculine and feminist paradigms is complex. To begin with, it seems that, for Stopford, it is not possible to separate being a woman and being a director. Her way into the world of directing arose directly from an acknowledgement of her inner sensual world, which, she believes, is constituted by a uniquely 'feminine' vision. Before she could enter what she perceived to be a male-dominated environment (the theatre), and overcome her fear of disapproval by this patriarchy, she had to claim a 'feminine' world of her own. Barney Simon encouraged her to break the mould of male expectation, and to express herself as she saw things, from her own unique perspective. So, in this sense, yes, she might be described as an essentialist, as someone who believes that masculine and feminine approaches to life are fundamentally different. And yet, Stopford is also aware of ways in which her recent involvement in corporate theatre, for example, have forced her to think in more 'masculine' ways, which she describes as being more 'analytical', and more 'cerebral'. So Stopford sees herself both as an 'intuitive feminist' and, at other times, as an 'analytical masculinist'. It seems, then, that she sees gender as a tool in the craft of directing, and that although she may consider qualities which are 'feminine' and 'masculine' to be innate, she certainly does not consider them to be immutable.

Another aspect which unsettles essentialist notions of 'femininity' in her directorial approach, is that Stopford includes in her definition of 'intuition' qualities which are distinctly 'unfeminine'. This is because, for Stopford, ‘intuition’ has less to do with being a man or a woman than it has to do with being faithful to one's own convictions. So to be intuitive is to have faith in one's instinctive responses, and to have the courage to maintain that faith. In this sense, to be intuitive is precisely not to be continuously swept away by one's emotions, and not to be passive, two aspects which a stereotypical definition of 'femininity' might require. Stopford explains:

> It’s one thing having the feelings, the imagination, the perceptions; but what really separates you from the herd is the confidence you need to propose your convictions to the world and then stand by them. So an intuitive insight must be sustained, otherwise you're vulnerable, you have no armoury against criticism, no way of surviving the rigours of the discipline.

To be true to one's intuition, then, requires a certain strength of will in demanding autonomy on a project. In this sense the demands of intuition, then, are not feminine demands, but rather the demands of an active individuality. Stopford says that the most important thing she learnt from Barney Simon was when he told her, 'You are your primary

tool. You are working with yourself first – and then come all the other elements'. Both intuition and intellect are thus subservient to one's own individuality:

> Making a play is like moving a huge ship through wild seas. There are so many elements to it that can't be carefully controlled. So it's vital to keep one's own centre in the middle of so much democratic negotiation and cajoling.

Working Methods: Three practical case studies

In keeping with Clare Stopford's emphasis on the particular instead of the general, a few case studies are presented here in order to introduce her style of working. We felt that instead of attempting to present a list of techniques and formulas methodising her approach, it would make more sense to show her way of responding to the particular challenges of specific plays which she has directed.

(A) DEVELOPING A VISION & WORKING WITH SENSE MEMORIES

CASE STUDY ONE: *A Doll's House*, by Henrik Ibsen. (The Market Theatre, 1988)

For Stopford, the work of preparing and developing one's 'vision' begins many months before a production. By 'vision' she means having a clear concept of a particular direction which is grounded, and yet still flexible; which gives the players a sense of confidence, but which also allows room for exploration and organic growth.

> Barney Simon used the word, 'vision' a lot. It seemed to me at the beginning quite a grand word for someone who religiously avoided pretension, but I grew to understand that he meant something quite practical with this word, namely a strong sense of how the play would happen on stage. He was looking for a connection with the piece and an idea of how that would translate into engaging theatre.
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> For example, when he asked me what my 'vision' was for *A Doll's House* my answer was 'I see Nora surrounded by wallpaper with huge flowers on it. She's invisible to herself, lost in a suffocating jungle of love.' For Barney Simon this was a vision which was worthy of the Market.
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> I don't want to put too much of a mystical spin on it, but a 'vision' inhabits you in mysterious ways. It's not always as concrete as *A Dolls House* was for me. Sometimes, like a painter, you don't feel like talking about it all. The vision often exists in fragments and yet, the company has got to have some notion of where we are heading, otherwise they'll flounder.
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> So you need this ability to hold onto your vision, but at the same time you need to be able to listen to challenges levelled against it. The director's vision is worth nothing without the understanding, buy-in and commitment of the actors. They are

> the medium through which the vision flows. Without the cast's active engagement the process may be efficient, but it will be lifeless.

Stopford's vision for this particular production illustrates her interest in the sensual and sexual engagement of her characters. This relates to her approach of always favouring the visceral over the cerebral. She felt that *A Doll's House* was able to speak directly to a contemporary sensibility, except for one thing – the lack of displays of physical intimacy, which were dictated by the mores of the time in which it was written. So:

> I wanted Act V – which Ibsen sets around the dining room table – to take place in their bedroom after they've just had sex. I wanted Torvald quite drunk by the end of the Act IV, exactly when Nora is planning to leave him. He would grow amorous, groping her and eventually taking what he considers are his conjugal rights. She endures it with pain, knowing she is about to drop a bomb into his life. In Act V then, he is asleep and she carefully gets out of bed. She wipes herself down and starts packing to leave. He wakes up and the painful leave-taking scene takes place with him partially naked in bed and Nora at the dressing table removing her makeup.

Gretha Fox as Nora being groped by Torvald (Ron Smerczak) in *A Doll's House*.

Grethe Fox as Nora in *A Doll's House* in an intimate moment.

In this way Stopford approaches a painfully intimate moment by means of a physical representation in terms of the end of an act of sexuality. By going into such extremely fine detail (such as the fact that Nora 'wipes herself down'), Stopford tries to approach and convey a tangible, visceral 'reality', and goes beyond what some might consider to be acceptable as a public portrayal. Since private actions are often considered taboo in a public forum, an intensely private gesture such as this would often be omitted, and yet, as Stopford says 'this would make nonsense of the "reality" which theatre practitioners should be trying to convey':

> If Nora and Torvald open the last act having just made love and I have her getting out of bed to pack up and leave, then, logically she will have seminal fluid about to flow down her inner thigh. What would she do about this? She would wash, or wipe herself down. Every woman (and every perceptive man) in the audience would know this. By including the gesture, I'm honouring a knowledge that the audience and I share. So although one might be breaking the audience's comfort zones with such an intimate gesture, you're building a kind of trust by stimulating in them real connections with their sense memories.
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> There's a dialectic at work here, between public and private spaces – between what's deemed permissible, and what's seen as taboo. As a director, I'm aware of

> the tension I'm creating in an audience, and I consciously try to push the boundaries of public consumption. This is at the heart of how I work. Of course I can never predict exactly how an audience will receive something I give them, but I am aware of the social context in which I'm working. So the reason why I think drama works on this level is because of the frisson created by this tension, which makes for sensually exciting theatre.

This notion of deliberately transgressing public taboos is part of Stopford's style. It seems that by making an audience aware of what they already know – even if (or, perhaps, especially when) the revelation of this knowledge makes them uncomfortable – she invites the engagement and complicity of her audience in the creation of the drama being portrayed on stage.

(B) DEVELOPING A TEXT: Plot vs. character in political drama

CASE STUDY TWO: *Green Man Flashing* by Mike van Graan

(Grahamstown National Arts Festival, Market Theatre, and the Baxter. 2004-2005)

It is now more than a decade since the advent of democracy in South Africa, and some fifteen years since Albie Sachs call for a temporary moratorium on the slogan that 'culture is a weapon of struggle' (1990: 239). What has happened to political theatre since the end of apartheid? Of course this depends on one's definition of what it means to be political, and besides the revisionist plays on the apartheid years, there have also been many plays which deal with issues of power, whether this has been configured in terms of gender, sexuality or economics. As far as I am aware, however, Mike van Graan's *Green Man Flashing* is the first production to directly challenge the possibility of corruption in the present government, and could well mark the advent of a new strand of 'political theatre' for South Africa.

And yet, even when working with an overtly political piece such as this one, Stopford still maintains the same devotion to subtle conflicts of intimacy and sexuality which came to the fore in her interpretation of Ibsen. In this way, she has also rewarded the expectations of a number of theorists as to what a 'New South African' theatre might look like. Ten years ago (in 1995) Yale's *Theater Magazine* published a special issue in which various predictions were made about the direction which South African theatre was likely to take following the demise of apartheid. Mark Gevisser, Malcolm Purkey, Carol Steinberg and Loren Kruger all, to a greater or lesser extent, predicted a move from a public space –

where issues of collective identity were debated – to a more intimate and personal theatre concerned with individual experiences[3].

Stopford's work has certainly satisfied (and even, to an extent, typified) these predictions with its emphasis on intensely personal spaces. What may have been more difficult to predict was that she would use this approach in a play such as *Green Man Flashing*, which is, essentially, a political thriller.

> Briefly, *Green Man Flashing* is about an MEC who rapes his PA. But this MEC is pivotal in keeping peace in Kwazulu-Natal during the '99 elections, so it's crucial that he remains in his position to avoid bloodshed. The rape survivor (Gabby) is pressurised and threatened by a delegation from 'the party' to drop the rape charges against her boss, whilst her staunch feminist lawyer friend is pressuring her to lay charges. So she's caught up between these various agendas. It's a piece which revolves around the machinations of power. But even though it's a text which is very much about the world of will and ideas, my way into it was to start with the characters.
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> What I said to Mike [van Graan] was that we're not always interested in *what* the characters are saying, but in *how* they're saying it. I was encouraging him to introduce more psychology. You see, what's happening to Gabby is that something excruciatingly private is being traded in a marketplace of ideas. The issue of rape is being weighed in against the possible loss of hundreds of lives in Kwazulu-Natal; but how do you make this situation emotional and not simply – there's that word again – academic?
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> My clue came in the almost universal obsession that rape survivors have with washing themselves after the rape: a single visceral image. So I put a free-standing bath on stage surrounded by a see-through shower curtain. I carefully built up to the actual moment when she undresses and gets into the bath. Her nakedness spoke worlds about her vulnerability and exposure. The see-through curtaining became a translation of her feeling of being smothered - and of her lack of privacy.

Again, Stopford here focuses her vision on an intuitive understanding of sexuality. In the same way that the height of the conflict between Torvald and Nora was portrayed by means of their naked bodies, here too, the physical body – the pure, empty representation of an unquantifiable, nameless experience – becomes the site of a conflict of ideologies. For Stopford, 'sex and pain' are key tenets in her exploration of dramatic possibilities.

> Barney Simon said to me one day after we saw a show, 'That show had no sex or pain' and I said, 'What do you mean?' And he said, 'Look at the way the actors related to each other and the things around them. There was no touching, texture, or tension – no sensuality on stage.' Barney saw sex as the missing element because he divined that the taboos of sex and exposure were blocking the actors and director. The same can also be said for the absence of pain in a production. If

Jennifer Steyn in the Bath – ***Green Man Flashing***

> the cast and director are avoiding pain in their own lives it won't find its way onto the stage.

A further element of the sexual drama on stage occurs in terms of Gabby and Aaron's failed marriage.

> Gabby (Jenny Steyn) and Aaron (Vusi Kunene) are in a marriage that's collapsing. I had to find a way to make this series of scenes live on stage with nothing but a chair, the actors and their bodies – and space. So we went three years back to where their sex life was still hot and they were still very much in love. In the first scene, I asked Steyn to fuss over his tie while she moaned at him for going away on trips so often and I asked him to make it difficult for her by nuzzling her neck and stealing hugs and kisses. We now had a departure point for their relationship which we could all believe in by simply exploring the textures of intimacy; by getting them to flow inside each other's space as if they had cohabited for the last twelve years. Progressively their bodies onstage became more and more distant as the relationship deteriorated.
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> So that's what I mean by sex: sensuality, texture between people. That's what makes it real or not.

For Stopford, then, 'reality' exists first and foremost on a physical, sexual level, and all other considerations of political or ideological motivations follow after. It may be worthwhile to briefly explore Stopford's placing of the actor's body within space in terms of her selection of scenography and set. What is important here is that one should not confuse a detailed and realistic approach to character, experience and emotion with a literal naturalism. On the contrary, many of Stopford's plays employ highly innovative and occasionally surreal spectacles in terms of staging, as the following example will demonstrate.

(C) WORKING WITH SPECTACLE: CHOOSING A SET

CASE STUDY FOUR: *Kafka Dances* by Timothy Daly (The Market theatre, 1996.)

For Clare Stopford, her route into *Kafka Dances* was unusual. Usually she starts with the characters, since, as already elaborated, she is fascinated primarily by 'what happens between people', rather than in the mechanics of the various forms of stage machinery, but for this play her starting point was a vision of a strange surreal landscape.

> *Kafka Dances* is a fascinating piece about Kafka's inability to 'move' because of his torturous relationship with his overbearing father. On the one hand we encounter Kafka's attempts to learn to dance with his fiancé, his blocks as a writer, and his relationship with his family on a mundane day to day level. This is contrasted with a semi-dream world in which a Yiddish Theatre Troupe (played by his family) act out in hideous melodrama all his worst nightmares about himself as a failure.
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> Some directors arrive at concepts through what I (and Barney) considered contrived or dishonest precepts, such as the need to impress with theatrical sensationalism, reaching for 'effect', and so on. We were opposed to this approach, which seemed to us pretentious. And yet, when I did *Kafka Dances,* I specifically approached it by means of the decor, so I was consciously breaking my own rules and making a choice based on theatrical effect.
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> The play presented unique staging challenges since we wanted to glide from one world to another with dream-like ease. There was a picture in my mind of this Yiddish Theatre show – the traditional gas-lit stage and dark red velvet curtains of the time – and this was my starting point. I wanted to create a world of swirling theatrical curtaining, arranged in such a way that it would constantly change the shape and feeling of the space on the stage. These curtains were given the life of puppets by the performers. Pulled, billowed, twisted and coiled, the fabric added whimsy, nightmare, romance, comic absurdity, and surrealism to the piece. It ultimately created a dark womb for Kafka's despair over his paralysis, his inability to dance, his inability to partake in life and to create.

It seems that Stopford prefers to work with an abstract, or suggestive set, rather than one that aims for 'naturalism[4]'. In *Green Man Flashing* she also decided on a non-realistic set:

> Because of *Green Man Flashing*'s dance across time and place, I wanted a space which was neutral, and yet elegant. One of the motifs of the piece was the legal Inquiry at the heart of the text, and it occurred to me that, in some way, all five characters were morally on trial. So I created a *Khotla*, an *imbizo* with a circle of chairs on which the actors sit until it's their turn to enter the circle and interact. The stage is bare besides these chairs, and, of course, the bath at the back. This set allowed for an extraordinary mobility of location, as well as interesting levels of tension and conflict.

So far, this essay has explored Stopford's intuitive approach to building a vision; finding the 'sex and pain' between the characters; and locating the conflict in a workable, elegant environment on stage. The most important part of her work as a director, however, occurs in her personal interaction with her actors.

The joy of a willing actor

> 'Thanks to Clare for being the only director I know to give notes after closing night.'
> (Russell Savadier. Acceptance speech for Best Supporting Actor in
> *Burn This.* FNB Vita Award. 1989.)
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> 'I want to thank my director Clare Stopford for her relentless, sometimes cruel, impossible pursuit of the truth of this character.'
> (Aletta Bezuidenhout. Acceptance speech for Best Actress in *Scenes from an Execution.* 1994.)
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> 'When I first worked with Clare in 1996, I discovered that I was allowed to make a mess. She wanted all options I could think of. And I was never judged. It was incredibly liberating.'
> (Jennifer Steyn, at the Directing Master Class with Clare Stopford. Actor's Centre, Johannesburg. 21 November 2004.)

Any discussion of Clare Stopford's directing technique would have to keep coming back to the enormous respect she has for her actors[5]. She believes in creating a place of safety within rehearsals, where, because of her faith and trust in them, her actors are encouraged to explore[6]. During one of her directing Master Classes at the Actor's Centre (Civic Theatre, Johannesburg, 21 November 2004), Stopford allowed the participants to watch her directing a scene from *Macbeth*, and then invited their responses. One of the students said, 'I didn't like it when she –', but she was cut short before she could say another word, as Stopford interrupted her:

> We never 'not like' anything. Take the judgement out of everything you say. Turn your entire method of communication around into the most positive way you can put

> it. When you say, 'Don't do this', you're blocking an actor. You're creating a negative environment. Rather use language that invites, or suggests, such as 'How would it be if….', or 'What do you think of this possibility?' Or start on an inspirational note: 'It would be great if…'

Jennifer Steyn supports Stopford's method of communication: 'Clare will use phrases like 'I really loved it when you….' and you feel chuffed and fluff up a bit and feel 'Oh good, I did something really nice back then. It makes you feel excited about the next challenge.'

For Stopford there is no impersonal way of working with actors, since the process of rehearsing a play requires that they expose aspects of their most private selves.

> If one is asking the audience to go somewhere, to a place that's charged with possibility, one first has to get the actor to take the same journey. You're asking the actor, 'Please bring me the most private, crucial, honest thing you know about this particular moment.'
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> So you build a world of verisimilitude through minutiae – moment for moment, beat by beat. Every single line is an emotional beat, and every beat carries a choice the actor has to make. I try to break the script down into impulses, either emotionally or in action. And this 'plan' keeps moving around on an axis, because actors are breathing, dreaming, feeling, thinking entities.
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> By the time your actors leave the rehearsal room they should have experienced a palette of emotions in relation to each beat. They should also be in no doubt about which emotional colours have finally been chosen. The actors are never left guessing. They've got a detailed emotional map which has been negotiated between them and myself. Barney Simon taught me that 'life on stage is made up of a series of consequences', and the performer must honour these.
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> These methods are not exclusive to me, but perhaps I implement them with more consistency than other directors, because I'm so interested in the forensics of behaviour. For example, I particularly enjoy helping an actor to remove emotional blocks or obstacles to their character. Again, these methods are private and reflect my personal 'take' on what's needed; they could involve a private conversation between the performer and myself, because it's not always appropriate for everybody to hear everything I have to say. I think perhaps it takes courage and a specific brand of interest to say to an actor 'There's a problem here, and I think we should talk about it. I think it's got something to do with the fact that you got divorced two years ago, and you're now...etc. etc. etc.'
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> You really have to be sensitive if you're going to do this. You have to ask permission from the performer, saying, for example, 'Do you think it'll be helpful if we talk about this?' I don't like to force actors to go where they don't want to go. I like to knock on the door, not smash it down. I don't think directors have the right to do that. One should issue an invitation: 'I think there's a problem here and it might help us to move forward if we deal with it.' Of course, sometimes I take a risk and use more forceful communication, because I'm desperate for a break-through. But this is seldom necessary. Most blocks are related to a crisis of conviction. I think this is because sometimes writers ask for extraordinary leaps in human behaviour.

The performer can feel the possibility of these jumps in their bones, but common sense tells an actor to protect themselves. I'll give you an example:

In my production of *Burn This* by Lanford Wilson (1989, The Market Theatre) Anna – who was played by Terry Norton – is a top contemporary dancer in New York. She's besieged by the boorish brother of a very close friend of hers who has just died. Half-demented by loss, he invades her space and makes her evening hell, and yet they end up making passionate love. Terry struggled with this leap for a long time, wondering, for example, at which stage her character finds this man attractive. She asked me how she could possibly be thinking about sex when she's just come back from her best friend's funeral. And how could she have sex with a man she's known for only two and a half hours?

So we talked a lot about the pain of loss, but important as this investigation was, the solution ultimately lay in silence. As Keogh's performance of Larry grew with infuriating charm and humour, I suggested to Terry that she simply stop trying to understand her own character's behaviour – to just listen and watch. 'Allow yourself to be worked on. Let him effect you', I told her. And when she allowed herself to be 'infected' by him the results were electric! Here the obstacle was that Terry thought she had to understand the character's actions, but the truth is that we don't always understand everything about ourselves. This is a good example of the approach I tried to explain earlier which favours the visceral over the cerebral[7].

While this is an example of a huge leap required by a writer, it applies to detailed work as well. The main thing is that the cast should always feel like they're on fertile ground. Aletta Bezuidenhout and Jenny Steyn know they can take this space without permission. When I work with actors who understand this creative flow, directing feels winged – easy and effortless. With a minimum of discussion they show you. They do it. They trust the freedom they've been given and they trust you, the director, to shape their raw material. Both Steyn and Bezuidenhout have the emotional intelligence to guide them into creative experiments which have little to do with me.

Clare Stopford believes in allowing her actors room to manoeuvre, and yet, she is also constantly aware that she is their guide. Earlier in this essay, she used a metaphor which involved seeing a production as a ship which she tries to steer through stormy seas. She also uses the analogy of mountaineering and sees herself as a kind of sherpa, prepared to take on an actor's 'baggage' before proceeding to the next level of the climb:

I have a sense of the actor's process being defined by moments of arrival, like plateaux of safety during a tough rock climb. You assess whether the actor is now feeling safe, ready and strong enough for the next part of the journey. I try to unpack one layer at a time, according to the individual needs of the performer. Often, though, it's a zigzag, trying things from many angles before we hit a plateau. Another way of putting it is that it's task oriented. I think to myself, 'Okay now that's in place, let's look at the next task'. You will sense from the actor when she is ready to move on to the next level.

Yet another analogy sees her in the role of a chef:

> Barney Simon summed up the delicate balance between intervention and respect: 'When you put heat under an egg, it takes on its own life. All you can do is stir it, or time it, but it has its own constitution.' This is what a director does with actors. You put heat under them and see what happens. It's an organic process. Your role as a director is finite.'

But ultimately, to return to the introduction of this section, Clare Stopford considers her complete dedication and commitment to her actors as individuals to constitute the defining aspect of her relationship with them:

> I sometimes say that I go to sleep with my actors under my pillow every night. I sift through their blocks, their problems, trying to find solutions in my sleep. I'm working specifically with the psychology of each actor, their relationship with acting, their relationship with fear and stretching. Each performer is a separate project for that moment in time.

The Necessity of Mentorship: Adventures with Barney Simon

It might appear to be a curious paradox, but Stopford believes that in order to develop a sense of confidence in one's own intuitive capabilities, one often requires the encouragement of a mentor. She believes that one requires an apprenticeship in order to develop into a credible director. For her, this education was not acquired at an institution or through the study of texts, but rather via many years spent with her friend and mentor, Barney Simon, whose presence has already permeated this discussion from the very beginning. It was Simon who helped Stopford to develop a view of the human individual as an organic whole, and who encouraged her to relate her work to the influences and experiences of her everyday life. She claims that her tutelage under Simon was filled with vigorous laughter, an astonishing energy, and her sheer enjoyment of the many peculiar idiosyncrasies of his style. She says that he cultivated in her a demand for honesty, and a sensitive knowledge of stagecraft:

> One of the things about Barney that everyone who worked with him will have experienced was his way of blending work and personal life. If he was due to give you notes, you would be integrated into his obligatory walk with his dog Sammy in Bez Park, or the cooking of supper which might take up a whole night. Interspersed with anecdotes and stories that illustrated in long hand the direction your piece should go, would be blow by blow broadcasts of how the meal was being cooked. For example, the chicken would be rubbed with coarse salt for it's crispy texture; the sandwiches would have to be layered carefully – first the butter, then the cheese, then the fig jam (for surprise), and then a sprinkle of sesame seeds (for crunch). Barney was dedicated to taking you *inside* the texture of each experience. He would

watch your face carefully for the pleasure he was convinced he would see with your first bite. Barney seldom gave you direct notes. He wanted you to understand the principle of the thing he was trying to convey to you, and then to integrate this into yourself.

At other times, there would be long silences while the clock ticked and the chicken spat in the oven and then suddenly Barney would speak with oracular succinctness, saying things like ‘Each line is a new leaf that just has to unfurl.’ This might be the sum of his response to a new script. He meant that it was all there – but each intention had to be teased open. By the time Barney died we had developed a cryptic shorthand of brief exchanges. For example, ‘It’s missing the grain of sand’, would mean that the essential element of friction between characters (which could transform your work into a pearl) was missing.

And there was lots of laughter: self-deprecating, humanistic, Jewish laughter. On the way to work one day we were talking so much we took the wrong turn and ended up on the road to Soweto. Then, finally arriving at the Market car park we locked the keys in his car! We laughed a lot at our mutual chaos. The irony was that within all of this chaos, his world on stage became more and more uncluttered and ordered. One of the last things I learnt from Barney was to keep refining one's choices. Before he died he did an intense flurry of work which was extraordinarily refined – rarefied even – with a strong thread of romanticism in it as if, after years of reflecting the social and political realities of South Africa, he was giving himself space to express his own dreams and yearnings.

The Suit was one of the last plays that he directed. He used only a table with two chairs and a bed. The power of the suit itself was materialised with the most simple of theatrical tools, but with such care and precision: it hung in space and became a constant, malevolent presence. It was as if he had eradicated every bit of theatrical ‘white noise’ from his mind and had carved this story down to the most painful bare elements. I think this is what Barney had been trying to do in his work for a long time. And it finally came together: the vision in his head, the sensibility and the skills and commitment of the actors, the single note of a flute, two lights instead of ten. It was a pared down, elegant, eloquent, emotionally excoriating piece of theatre, laced with ironic humour[8]. This was in 1994.

A year or two later, I saw Peter Brook's *The Man Who*, which I think shared a sensibility with Barney Simon's work. Then, in 1997 I watched Simon McBurney during his technical ‘get in’ at the Olivier of *Caucasian Chalk Circle*. Again, I saw the same paring down, the same search for the single eloquent proposal.

These experiences fed into where I am currently as a director. I think that in *Scenes from an Execution* (1994), I took my first tentative steps towards minimalism by insisting that a huge painting at the centre of the play was not materialised at all. I wanted the play to live purely by means of the written text and gestures.

I certainly don't think I've achieved what the Simons, Brooks and McBurneys have yet, but the yearning for that moment, when text, narrative, a simplicity of style and the emotional journey; when all these elements come together – that’s what I'm after.

It has now been ten years since the passing of Barney Simon, and since Clare Stopford's minimalist setting for *Scenes from an Execution*. In one of her most recent successes, *Green Man Flashing*, it seems that these aims towards purity have become even more crystallized. And this is a fitting piece with which to conclude this essay, since it brings together many of the elements which are so important to Clare Stopford as a director. The play is centred on a crucial contemporary debate; it is filled with sex and pain; and it portrays a finally detailed, emotional study of authentically realised characters. *Green Man Flashing* is an excellent example of the sort of highly intuitive, specifically nuanced productions which have contributed towards Clare Stopford's standing as one of the most individualistic – and one of the most talented – South African directors working today.

Notes

1) The British director Jonathan Miller expresses a similar approach: "I see the whole of my life as being engaged in research...My life is devoted to reading and looking at pictures and from time to time this culminates in my direction of a play" (in Giannachi 1999:91).

2) Here Stopford seems to be echoing Julia Pascal who also claims to work "by instinct rather than analysis" (in Giannachi 1999:115).

3) In his essay in *Theater Magazine*, 'Truth and Consequences in Post-Apartheid Theater' Mark Gevisser talks about 'privacy' returning to the post-apartheid stage (1995:14-15), and a move away from the public space of the anti-apartheid struggle which concerned itself more with a collective identity than with that of the individual:

> If the grand public project of apartheid, and the grand public response of resistance, collectivised identity and devalued individual experience, then surely 'truth and reconciliation' is primarily a matter of relocating individual and private experiences within a rubric of an epic liberation struggle and its socio-economic consequences. There are, after all, histories other than public ones that need to be reclaimed (Gevisser 1995:14).

Similarly, in their essay in the same journal issue of *Theater Magazine* ('South African Theatre in Crisis'), Malcolm Purkey and Carol Steinberg write that a trend in post-apartheid theatre seems to indicate 'representations of personal and community interaction' (1995:26) as opposed to issues of the 'grand struggle'. They also note that anti-apartheid theatre 'focused almost exclusively on public space'. (Admittedly, Purkey and Steinberg do note certain exceptions, such as Athol Fugard and Barney Simon. They also mention *Street Sisters* and *You Strike a Woman you Strike a Rock* as exceptions which focused on female antagonists rather than male [1995:30].)

Loren Kruger also predicts a theatre of 'intimacy', growing out of the 'protest drama...and "liberation musicals"' of the anti-apartheid theatre. She writes that 'The political force of anti-apartheid theatre depended on exploding the boundaries between public and private spaces, between the political and the domestic spheres.' (1995: 51)

4) Clare Stopford: 'If I could make a broad, sweeping statement, I would say that South African theatre eschews naturalism. I think it prefers a selection of natural elements, and a theatrical extrapolation. Apart from Aubrey Sekhabe's searing *On My Birthday* (2003) which was about wife battering, and which employed full naturalism on stage – from kitchen sink to a sheet full of chopped up body parts drenched in blood – there is little evidence that South African theatre will further itself anywhere near a kitchen sink.'

5) One of the reasons why Clare Stopford feels that the corporate world could benefit from theatre, is that she considers actors to be the ultimate multi-taskers who have all the qualities any CEO would love to have. She believes in the perseverance, dedication and self-discipline of her actors.

6) Similarly, Lev Dodin, of the Maly Dramatic theatre of St Petersburg, says that he tries to encourage his actors to not fear failure: '...if you are not afraid of a failure you can try, you can experiment, you can search for new ways, whereas when you are afraid of failure...you would do it the way you did it yesterday' (in Delgado 1996: 74).

7) Stopford notes that much of a director's work is spent 'removing obstacles' in the actor's process towards building a character. On the other hand, introducing a restriction – an obstacle – can often result in a more complex, more textured solution.

> In *Green Man Flashing*, apart from the rape, Gabby has lost her son through violent crime and suffered a divorce, so the actress is walking through a minefield of invitations to melodrama. To help her to contain her volatile emotions, I asked Jenny to work with some of the primary symptoms of post-traumatic stress, which are, for example: jumping if someone moves fast towards you; flinching at loud noise, and a general disorientation. She integrated these wonderfully into the axis of her character. Someone who jumps at a loud sound is unlikely to make one herself. But then the problem was that Gabby became too frail and fragile and lost presence. This time our solution was to return to her back story.
>
> Before disaster struck Gabby was a feisty, intelligent woman – a fighter. So having immersed herself in the effects of post-traumatic stress, Jenny now had to fight them as her character would. She had direct access to the excessive pain of the character and, ultimately, she found a perfect balance in the performance by working with a restriction.

8) In his 1996 essay "Truth and Consequences in Post-Apartheid Theater", Mark Gevisser sees Barney Simon's *The Suit,* as heralding 'a new interest in naturalism in Black South African theater' (14) and sees it as reclaiming 'the living room, the kitchen table, the kitchen sink'. However, according to Stopford, he missed the visual poetry of the piece. The fact is that there was hardly any set at all, and the actors changed their clothes and characters in full view of the audience. The world of domesticity was created through brief 'fragments' of that world, and the apparent naturalism existed only in the imagination.

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All quotes by Barney Simon, Aletta Bezuidenhout, Jennifer Steyn and Russell Savadier are as recollected by Clare Stopford.